

# THE Princess Virginia

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Authors of "The Lightning Conductor," "Rose-  
mary in Search of a Father," Etc.

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He lifted the white curtains and peeped through a small antechamber into the music room beyond. It was empty but one of the long windows leading into the rose garden was wide open.

The month of September was dying and away in the Rhaetian mountains winter had begun. Yet in the lap of the low country summer lingered. The air was soft and sweet with the perfume of roses—roses living and roses dead in a potpourri of scattered petals on the grass. It was a garden for lovers and a night for lovers.

Egon went to the open window and looked out, but dared not let his eyes take the direction of his eyes, though he was sure that somewhere in the garden Miss Mowbray and the emperor were to be found.

"They will come in again this way," he said to himself, "for they will want people to think they have never left the music room, and for that very reason they won't stop too long. They must have some regard for the conventions. If I wait."

He did not finish the sentence in his mind. Nevertheless he examined the resources of the window niche with a critical eye.

There was a deep recess before between the window frame and the long straight curtains of olive green which outlined the decoration of the music room. By drawing the curtains a few inches further forward one could make a screen which would hide one from observation by any person in the room or outside in the garden. So Egon did draw the curtains and退入 his shelter like a squirrel in the steer night.

The moon was rising over the lake and long rays of level light were stealing up the paths, the fingers of a blind child that creeps gropingly the features of a beloved face.

Egon could not see the whole garden or all the paths among the trees. But if the emperor and his companion came back to the way they had gone he would know presently whether they walked in the attitude of friends or lovers. It was necessary for Egon to know this that he might by strength of will exercise a little influence in settling, of course if there were lovers, whether it was best for him to reassure his master.

"I don't understand," she faltered. "You are the emperor and I am no more than a—"

"You are my wife if you have me." In the shade of her curtain-sheen she was nervous to press him longer and he held her close and pressing his lips on her hair her face pressed against his breast. She could hear his heart beating fast it thrrob under her cheek this night. Then he freed her again for this. Yet now when it was possible for him to stand ready for his sake to overcome the tides of his own mind.

"My lips are sealed," he said again. "To think that you have been."

"I have loved you from the first," the princess confessed, "that I can stand and feel even if you were to strike me with your hand. Wound to God you were always kind and you should be my compass—the furthest compass that poet or historian ever saw—but we're prisoners of fate you and I. We must take the words the gods provide. My goddess you will always be, but the expression of Bluetra even my love isn't powerful enough to make you. If I am to you only half what you are to me you'll be satisfied with the snip of my heart."

Suddenly the warm blood of Virginia's veins grew cold. It was as if a wind had blown up from the dark depths of the lake to strike like ice to her soul. An instant more and he would have known that she was a princess of the blood, and through his whole life she could have gone on worshipping him because he had been ready to break down all barriers for her love before he guessed there need be none to break. Now her warm thin pulse of gratitude was frozen by the biting blast of disillusionment, but still there was time left. It might be that she misunderstood him. She would not judge him yet.

"The empire of your heart!" she cried. "If that were mine I should be richer than with all the treasures of the earth. If you were free, the chamois hunter, I would have you as I love you now, because in yourself you are the one man for me, and I'll go with you to the end of the world as your wife. But you're not the chamois hunter; you are the man I love, yet you are the emperor. Being the emperor had you talked of a hopeless love and a promise not to forget, having nothing else to give me because of your high destiny and my number one. I could still have been happy. Yet you speak of more than that. You speak of something I can't understand."

It seems to me that what a royal man offers the woman he loves should be all or nothing."

"I do offer you all," said Leopold "all myself, my life, the heart and soul of me—all that's my own to give. The rest belongs to Bluetra."

"Then what do you mean by?"

"Don't you understand, my sweet? I've asked you to be my wife? What can a man ask more of a woman

than?" "Your wife, but not the empress. How can the two be apart?"

He tried to take her once more in his arms, but when he saw that she would not have it so he held his love in check and waited. He was sure that he would not need to wait long, for not only had he laid his love at her feet, but had pledged himself to a tremendous sacrifice on love's altar.

The step which in a moment of passion he had now resolved to take would create dissension among his people, alienate one who had been his second father, rouse England, America and Germany to anger because of the princess whose name rumor had already coupled with his and raise in every direction a storm of disapproval. When this girl whom he loved realized the immensity of the concession he was making because of his reverent love for her she would give her life to him now and forever.

Tenderly he took her hand and lifted it to his lips. Then when she did not draw it away, because he was taking his chance of explanation, he told on between both his own as he talked on.

"Dearest one," he said, "when I first knew I loved you—loved you as I didn't dream I could love a woman for your sake and my own. I would have avoided meeting you so often. This I tell you frankly. I didn't see how in honor such a love could end except in despair for me and sorrow even for you if you should come to grief. Half you and Lady Mowbray stayed on at the hotel in Kremsburg. I wish I could have held to my resolve. But when Baroness von Lynda suggested your coming here my heart impelled me. I said in my mind 'At least I shall have the joy of seeing her more than for a time—I have done something in darkness for future Afterward when she has gone out of my life I shall have that cushion to remember. And so the last will be done in the end except that I shall have done it unfettered.' Still I had no thought of the future without a partner. I had that at extrinsic. And the suffering continued to banish with the joy, for not a single hour at Linzberg have I slept. If I had been a week I should have remained alone in the front of retribution."

"My name is open on a tablet. More than once I've come out from the darkness when all the household was sleeping. Sometimes I have walked to the

water's edge and sat down again. To think that you have been."

"I have loved you from the first," the princess confessed, "that I can stand and feel even if you were to strike me with your hand. Wound to God you were always kind and you should be my compass—the furthest compass that poet or historian ever saw—but we're prisoners of fate you and I. We must take the words the gods provide. My goddess you will always be, but the expression of Bluetra even my love isn't powerful enough to make you. If I am to you only half what you are to me you'll be satisfied with the snip of my heart."

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"I tell you that you cannot understand or you wouldn't say you wouldn't dare to say my love that I'd insulted you. Don't you see, don't you

know, that you would be my wife in the sight of all men as well as in the sight of God?"

"Your wife, you call it?" The princess gave a harsh little laugh which hurt as tears could not hurt. "You seem to have strange ideas of that word, which has always been sacred to me. A morganatic marriage? That is a mere pretense, a hypocrisy. I would be 'your wife' you say. I would give you all my love, all my life. You return would give me your left hand. And you know well that in our country which tolerates such a one-sided tryste of marriage the law would hold you free to marry another woman, a royal woman, whom you could make an empress—as free as if I had no existence."

"Great heaven, that you should speak so!" he broke out. "What if the law did hold me free? Can you dream so low as to dream the law would hold you free to marry another woman, a royal woman, whom you could make an empress—as free as if I had no existence?"

"So you may believe now. But the knowledge that you could change would be death to me, a death to die daily. Yes, I tell you again, it was an insult to offer a lot so miserable, so contemptible to a woman you propose to take. How could you do it? If once you had never spoken the harsh words if only you had left me in peace I had no reason, glorified above the whole world of mortals, to wish to leave you. But when Baroness von Lynda suggested your coming here my heart impelled me. I said in my mind 'At least I shall have the joy of seeing her more than for a time—I have done something in darkness for future Afterward when she has gone out of my life I shall have that cushion to remember. And so the last will be done in the end except that I shall have done it unfettered.' Still I had no thought of the future without a partner. I had that at extrinsic. And the suffering continued to banish with the joy, for not a single hour at Linzberg have I slept. If I had been a week I should have remained alone in the front of retribution."

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